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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ECON](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [CM](#)
SUBJECT: CAMEROON: A TALE OF TWO PRESIDENCIES

REF: A. YAOUNDE 556

[1](#)B. YAOUNDE 191
[1](#)C. YAOUNDE 404
[1](#)D. YAOUNDE 440

Classified By: Ambassador Niels Marquardt, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) In its 46 years of independence, Cameroon has only known two presidents, Ahmadou Ahidjo (1960-1982) and Paul Biya (1982-present). Ahidjo was a charismatic and decisive man who ruled a one-party state where citizens had no voice in their leadership. Under Ahidjo, Cameroon's economy fared well; the country enjoyed some of the strongest economic and social indicators in Africa. Since then, Biya has transformed Cameroon into a multi-party democracy with a growing focus on human rights and civil liberties. His economic legacy, however, has been marred by massive indebtedness, corruption, a ten year economic downturn and falling social indicators. Since his re-election in 2004, Biya seems to be thinking about his legacy and has engaged his government in a very serious approach to economic reform and restructuring, which is beginning to bear fruit. The outstanding question is whether Biya is capable of engineering a turn-around of his negative legacy of corruption, stagnation and neglect in the five years remaining in his presidency. End Summary.

Biya's Dilemma

[1](#)2. (U) In the 46 years since independence, Cameroon has only known two presidents, Ahmadou Ahidjo (1960-1982) and Paul Biya (1982-present). In November 2005, President Biya surpassed Ahidjo in years in power; he faces the constitutional end to his mandate in 2011, when he will be [1](#)78. This anniversary of sorts has led many in Cameroon to compare the two regimes. Ahidjo, of course, gets the benefit of time and some nostalgia in this examination as many look

back on his presidency through rose-colored glasses as a time of growth, development and no crime or corruption. Biya's tenure has seen a currency devaluation, economic collapse, enormous corruption, and difficult social challenges such as AIDS -- but he also has brought a sort of democracy and undeniably increased civic freedoms to Cameroon. On balance, each regime has its strong and weak points, and both combined reflect the path of many African nations from initial growth after independence, through subsequent stalling and financial crisis, to limited economic growth with increasing democracy and reform in recent years.

The Men and their Politics

¶3. (U) Ahmadou Ahidjo was a Muslim from the North Province of Cameroon. He put in place the regional and ethnic balance structure which still dominates Cameroonian politics today. This structure includes carefully calculated awarding and balancing of ministerial positions and other high-level appointments, with some key positions "reserved" for natives of particular provinces. Remembered as a charismatic and decisive man, Ahidjo traveled throughout the country and met with citizens regularly. He centered power in his office and person, making all major decisions quickly based on his own knowledge of the issue. He used force to repress rebellions in the southern and Anglophone provinces before and after independence. Under his rule, Cameroon's human rights record was dismal. This was a one-party state where citizens had no voice in their leadership. On the other hand, he was known and respected for tolerating no corruption within his government.

¶4. (U) Paul Biya took over when Ahidjo handed power to him by decree in 1982 (Biya had been Ahidjo's PM for seven years). This was Ahidjo's attempt to appease increased donor pressure for a move toward democracy, with a nominal change in regime, while continuing to rule through Biya. Biya turned out to have plans of his own and quickly took his own path. Many say that in response Ahidjo was behind the failed coup in 1984. Ahidjo denied such claims during a radio interview a day after the coup, but added that "if his partisans were behind it, it would be successful." Ahidjo left for a self-imposed exile in Senegal, where he died a few years later. His body has never been returned to Cameroon for burial, a source of political tension here and a sign of just polarized the two presidents eventually became.

¶5. (U) Biya is a Christian from the South Province. He is more reclusive, rarely traveling either within Cameroon or the African region. Aside from R&R trips to Switzerland, France, and sometimes Germany, he also rarely goes abroad, and is almost never seen in public. He has continued the political traditions of ethnic and regional balance in most government positions and of concentrating power in his own hands. His decision-making style, however, is very slow and deliberative, making decisions only after extensive personal consideration and input from multiple trusted advisors over longer periods of time than most observers would expect. (For example, we have been awaiting a government reshuffle here for months.) Therefore his government's decision-making process is cumbersome and often ineffective. The first decade of Biya's rule perpetuated Cameroon's one-party rule and poor human rights record, particularly as coup rumors swirled in the late 80s. Since 1992, however, Biya has stood for election three times, with each election being progressively more free and fair, although still flawed. Since 1992 Cameroon has also had opposition parties - several hundred, in fact -- and an increasingly free press. Moreover, Cameroon's previously poor human rights record has shown steady improvement over the last six years.

¶6. (SBU) Another interesting difference between the two men is that during Biya's regime the military leadership has taken on a distinct tribal slant. While there is some amount

of ethnic balance in the Armed Forces at large, the entire presidential guard and most of the senior generals are Beti, members of Biya's own ethnic group. Many believe that part of Biya's reaction to the 1984 coup attempt has been to only advance Betis -- the only ones he really trusts -- into positions of senior military leadership. Others feel that it reflects efforts by members of the President's region to hold on to power by creating a military which will prohibit any non-southerner from ascending to the presidency.

¶7. (U) In 1996 a new constitution enshrined some of Biya's democratic advancements and laid out a road map for the devolution of power out from the capital to the provinces. As noted in Ref B, however, this constitution is only half implemented, with many issues still being governed by the 1972 Constitution. Biya's 2004 election was his second, and last, under the 1996 Constitution. In 2011 Cameroonians should, for the first time, elect a completely new president.

The Economic Legacies

¶8. (U) Under Ahidjo, Cameroon had some of the strongest economic and social indicators for Africa. GDP growth rates, life expectancy and civil service wages were all high and unemployment was low. Cameroon depended on a diverse agricultural sector for its income and benefited greatly from the spike in world commodity prices in the late seventies. Ahidjo used the revenue in a concerted program of five-year infrastructure development plans. Commodities were regulated and sold under national parastatals in order to ensure maximum revenue to both the state and the producers (peasants). Most of modern Cameroon was built and paved under Ahidjo's reign. While Cameroon also developed a service and industrial sector, the firms were all parastatals, leaving little room for the development of a private sector. Ahidjo's regime also produced one of Cameroon's most valuable commodities, its well educated work force. Benefitting from the colonial legacy of education structures and traditions, Cameroon boasted a large number of literate and well educated workers.

¶9. (U) Biya's economic legacy is much more mixed. After Cameroon discovered oil in 1977, oil revenue was sufficient for Cameroon to feel it could borrow against it to cover the loss of income from the collapse of agricultural commodity prices. Trying to support the large weight of the heavily-subsidized parastatal structure built up by Ahidjo, Cameroon began to incur a huge debt load. This was aggravated by the deteriorating effects of the overvalued CFA (fixed to the French franc at the same rate since 1958). The late 1980s were a time of severe economic contraction from which Cameroon is only now beginning to emerge.

¶10. (U) In 1988 Cameroon began its first efforts to address its financial crisis by submitting to its first IMF program. The 50 percent devaluation of the CFA helped stimulate some growth in the economy, but the underlying structural problems caused by the bloated civil service, the number of parastatals and the large debt load required serious belt tightening. In response to the IMF's initial requirements that the overall civil service wage bill be cut in half, the Biya government kept all the positions, but cut salaries in half. Suddenly, in the period of two years a large segment of Cameroon's work force lost over 75 percent of its purchasing power. Many point to this event as the start of Cameroon's current problems with pervasive corruption, as many Cameroonians, out of economic need, exploit the rent-seeking opportunities their positions afford (Ref C). The job uncertainty that has resulted from the multiple IMF programs (which have strongly pushed for the privatization or liquidation of the majority of the inefficiently run parastatals) has also created deep uncertainty and instability on the job front.

¶11. (U) After many false starts and detours, Cameroon finally

achieved HIPC completion point on April 28. This will lead to the forgiveness of almost 2/3 of its foreign debt. Biya's current plans are to use the benefits of this debt forgiveness, combined with a strong anti-corruption campaign, to bring about positive economic change. The objectives are to invest heavily in health and education to help the country address the problems posed by AIDS and malaria and to bring education levels and standards back up to the Ahidjo era levels. Infrastructure, especially in Douala and certain intercity roads, needs to be upgraded as well.

Biya -- concerned about his legacy?

¶12. (C) In a 1991 interview on French television, Biya said that he would love to be remembered as the "man who brought democracy to Cameroon." But since his re-election in 2004, Biya seems to be re-thinking his legacy and its scope. While politically he leaves a fairly positive record, economically, Cameroon presents at best a more mixed picture and is certainly not the same country Biya inherited. Indeed, Biya recently asked the Ambassador rhetorically, "What pride would I feel in leaving Cameroon as it is today?" Since 2004 Biya has engaged his government in a very serious approach to economic reform and restructuring, which led to HIPC completion point. It is not yet certain, however, whether these changes will be deep enough to achieve clear economic advancements by the 2011 presidential election. Despite his strides to combat corruption, which will improve the economy and other social indicators, if overall economic results do not meet Biya's objectives, some wonder whether Biya will feel his political legacy is sufficient to leave office at the end of his constitutional mandate, or if he will try to stay on for an additional (currently unconstitutional) term to leave a strong double legacy.

Comment

¶13. (C) Complicating Biya's own calculations about his legacy is the question about who will be the presidential candidates. Particularly with Cameroon's opposition in disarray (Ref A), the President's CPDM party is the only one likely to produce a viable candidate. There is currently much quiet jockeying for power within the CPDM, mostly (but not only) by Southerners trying to ensure that the presidency remains in their hands. (Cameroon's albeit limited tradition suggests that it should go back to the north - as any Northerner will tell you.) But if the fractures become serious, Biya might conclude that the country is unready for a transition, and seek to change the constitution to permit yet another term.

¶14. (C) However, our feeling today is that any predictions about Biya trying to stay on for an additional term are off the mark. Indeed, with his young wife and family, his "retirement" house under construction next door to the embassy, and his sense of urgency about ongoing reforms, he seems to us a person who already has decided to live out his final days outside of public office. Legacy aspirations aside, his age and his health (Ref D) will be important factors that could even prevent him from completing his current constitutional mandate, let alone seeking another one. Our sense is that Biya is focused on his legacy and is working to ensure that he will have accomplished his stated goals by 2011. The measures taken to reach the HIPC completion point, to combat corruption, and to lead Cameroon toward Millennium Challenge eligibility increasingly represent fundamental changes to Cameroon's political, economic and social infrastructure. All of this augers well for Cameroonians having the opportunity to elect a new leader in 2011. End Comment.

MARQUARDT